"Since then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God; let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4: 14-16 ESV).[1]

Narrative

In Hebrews 4:14-16, the author revisits the "high priest" theme that he first introduced to his readers in chapter 2:17 and then again in chapter 3:1. This theme's recurrence is evident from the author's opening words: "Since then we have"[2] and the added "therefore"[3] (NIV) in chapter four and verse fourteen. Both phrases indicate a resumption of thought based on prior reference. 2:17 describes the high priest as "merciful" and "faithful." In 3:1, he is the "high priest of our confession." In 4:14, the high priest is called the "great" high priest. What stands out to the author and provides a tremendous word of comfort to his readers and listeners is that this great high priest belongs to the people of God! The author, writing in the first-person plural narrative, links himself directly with his audience.[4] He declares, "We have this great high priest who is Jesus the Son of God. The author strives to convey that this merciful, faithful, high priest of our confession and great high priest belongs to the believer.

In this epistle passage, the author of Hebrews expands on the great high priest's truth and then provides his readers with what should result from knowing the truth. In other words, *if* the Christian's great high priest is who he is, namely the eternal Son of God, *and* he has experienced on earth what Scripture reveals, *then* there should be a logical connection to the behavior of

[1] Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references in this paper will use the English Standard Version.
[2] The Greek ἔχω means to have or to own. To possess something is the author's intended meaning.
[3] The Greek οὖν, which indicates something follows from another.
[4] By chapter four of his letter this has already become characteristic of the inspired writer. See 2:1, 3:6, 4:1. He identifies himself being joined with God's people in a variety of his exhortations.

those who identify themselves with the high priest. So, the Christian must hold fast to his confession of faith and be confident in his prayers to God.

Great High Priest

The law of God, given to Moses, designated the chief priest, or high priest, as someone who would be set apart, even among other priests, for the work of the Lord. This chief of the priests was anointed with holy oil and consecrated in all aspects of his life.

"The priest who is chief among his brothers, on whose head the anointing oil is poured and who has been consecrated to wear the garments, shall not let the hair of his head hang loose nor tear his clothes. He shall not go into any dead bodies nor make himself unclean, even for his father or for his mother. He shall not go out of the sanctuary, lest he profane the sanctuary of his God, for the consecration of the anointing oil of his God is on him: I am the LORD. And he shall take a wife in her virginity. A widow, or a divorced woman, or a woman who has been defiled, or a prostitute, these he shall not marry. But he shall take as his wife a virgin of his own people, that he may not profane his offspring among his people, for I am the LORD who sanctifies him." Leviticus 21:10 - 15

The position of high priest continued into the New Testament age. Though corruption of that position was not uncommon, and blind hatred for the work of Christ was evident[5], the position (the office) commanded respect and honor.[6] However, the author of Hebrews is not saying that the Lord Jesus Christ was a high priest of the same kind as the high priests described under the Levitical law. He asserts that Christ is entirely superior to a typical earthly high priest. In fact, he is so much greater that he has "passed through the heavens" and is confirmed to be the Son of God. "Just as the Aaronic high priest went through the veil into the earthly Most Holy Place, so Christ has entered the very presence of God in heaven itself (9:1-10:19). "Who has gone through" translates a Greek perfect participle and signifies the continuing validity of Christ's having entered God's presence. The access to the Father that he has obtained is a present

[5] See Matthew 26 in which the Lord Jesus, falsely accused and under arrest, was subjected to the wicked questioning of Caiaphas the high priest.

[6] A good example of this culture of respect for the high priest is found in Acts 23:4-5 when the Apostle Paul stood before the council and was asked "would you revile God's high priest?" The apostle then declared he was unaware that he was speaking to the high priest.

and continuing reality for his people."[7] This is the same Son the author exalted in the opening section of his letter. He is the one who has "sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." (1:3) He is the one who is far superior to the angelic hosts in heaven.[8]

The author describes the high priest as a "great" high priest. As has been his objective in prior passages[9], the inspired writer is determined to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ and show how superior He is to all others. He continues that purpose by using the adjective "*great*." The adjective might be redundant since the high priest was already considered the greatest of the Levitical priests. Philip Hughes writes, "The force of the adjective 'great' (μέγας) here is indicated by the consideration that in Hebrew the title 'high priest' is literally great priest."[10] In a sense, the writer is essentially declaring that the Lord Jesus is the great priest! What seems likely from this is that the author is laying the groundwork for the word of comfort and exhortation he is about to bring.

Our Confession

Since the people of God have such a great high priest, and since this high priest has "passed through the heavens" as the eternal Son of God, the result should be that the people the high priest represents maintain their confession of faith! In other words, the confession and the continuation of that confession should be grounded in the glorious truth of the high priest's greatness and accomplishments. This is a powerful motivating factor for the Christian.

Writing of the greatness of the high priest and this connection to his people, Peter O'Brien comments, "For now his greatness is expressed in the language of transcendence: Jesus

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[7] Gareth Lee Cockerill The Epistle to the Hebrews (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012) 224
[8] The superior name and being of the Lord Jesus Christ over and above the angels is the argument of Hebrews chapter 1.
[9] We've seen in the early chapters that the Son of God is superior to the angels, Moses, and now the greatest of the Levitical priests!
[10] Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, A Commentary On The Epistle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 169

has passed through the heavens into the presence of God (9:24). Although this has not been explicitly mentioned previously, the notion has been implied in earlier references to Christ's exaltation (1:3, 13; 2:9-10)."[11] The commentator then links the Son of God to the response of his people. He writes, "The title Son of God is mentioned in relation to the 'confession,' and it is to this that the listeners are to *hold firmly* or be fully committed, just as they had been urged to hold on to their boldness, confidence, and boast firm to the end (3:6, 14).[12] As he does throughout his letter, the author urges listeners to strongly and tenaciously cling to Christ the Lord. The word in the original language used for "hold fast" is κρατῶμεν, which means to keep carefully and faithfully, seizing or continuing to hold on. It is the same word used by the Apostle John writing to the angel of the church in Sardis, "I am coming soon. *Hold fast*[13] what you have, so that no one may seize your crown" (Revelation 3:11).

Confession, as used by the biblical writer, is synonymous with faith. John Calvin writes, "Confession is here, as before, to be taken as a metonymy[14] for faith; and as the priesthood serves to confirm the doctrine, the Apostle hence concludes that there is no reason to doubt or to waver respecting the faith of the Gospel because the Son of God hath approved and sanctioned it."[15] When Calvin writes "as before," he is referencing the word confession used in Hebrews 3:1. In this passage, the Lord Jesus is described as "the apostle and high priest of our confession." In fact, the NIV translates the word confession as the word for faith. "Therefore,

[11] Peter T. O'Brien The Letter to the Hebrews (Pillar NT Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 181
[12] O'Brien, Hebrews, 181,182
[13] Italics added for emphasis.
[14] A metonymy is a figure of speech in which something is called not by its own name but by a name closely associated with something. An example is the word "Hollywood" often used to refer to the motion picture industry. Calvin is asserting the author of Hebrews uses confession in the same manner he uses faith.
[15] John Calvin, Hebrews (Calvin's Commentaries 22; trans. John Owen; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 107.

since we have a great high priest, who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the son of God, let us hold firmly to the *faith* we profess." (Hebrews 4:14 NIV)

Sympathize

In Hebrews 4:15, the author shifts his attention from the high priest's eternal and transcendent nature to a person his people can readily identify. This is because this same high priest can sympathize[16] with the people's weaknesses. This is because the high priest was tempted in ways similar to those of his people. Yet this priest did not falter and was completely without sin. The word 'sympathize' can be closely compared to the word 'empathize.' In other words, the author is conveying that the Lord Jesus can empathize with his people because he himself, as fully man, experienced temptations. Peter O'Brien writes, "The verb rendered *empathize* was used of a bond similar to a mother's feeling for her children or one brother's feeling for another."[17] This is the incarnate Son of God! He is full of compassion and understanding for those who are weak due to their sinful nature.

The blessed truth that the eternal Son of God is fully man, a man who was tempted in every way yet without sin, is the foundation for God's people to κρατῶμεν (hold firm) their confession of faith. Just as the eternal nature of the Son of God is a logical reason for remaining steadfast, the author of Hebrews states that the human nature of the high priest serves the same purpose. "Because Jesus has experienced and overcome every kind of temptation to which humans are subject, he can empower his people in their human weakness. Jesus' victory over temptation is even more reason why 'we' should 'hold firmly to the faith we profess' (v. 14). His victory is the basis of our confidence to approach the throne of grace in times of testing and

[16] The Greek for sympathy is συμπαθέω - to be affected with the same feeling as another. To have compassion on.
[17] O'Brien, Hebrews, 182

temptation (v. 16)."[18] Since the Lord Jesus Christ is fully human and has experienced trials and temptations all too familiar in a sin-cursed world, He can sympathize with His people.

"Yet Without Sin"

In chapter four, verse fifteen, the author is concerned to remind his readers and listeners that, though the high priest was tempted as everyone else, unlike everyone else, he did not succumb to temptation by sinning. He was "tempted as we are, yet without sin."[19] In other words, this great high priest experientially empathizes with what his people go through when under temptation, and because of his victory over sin, is now his people's perfect representative. Unlike an earthly high priest who had to offer sacrifices for his own sins,[20] this great high priest was without any sin. He overcame sin, and His office as High Priest represents his people. "This sinlessness, it should be stressed, is not something passive, a mere state of being, but the achievement of Christ's active conquest of temptation. Indeed, it is entirely synonymous with the complete obedience learned by him through all he endured, by which his perfection was won and established, and which fitted him to become the source of eternal salvation (Heb. 2:10;5:8f)."[21] The inclusion "yet without sin" is not a mere side note in the author's instruction. It is a vital description of the obedience of the great high priest and demonstrates his perfect worthiness to hold his office. It also provides even more reason to come with "confidence" to the "throne of grace."[22]

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[18] Cockerill, Hebrews, 225
[19] Hebrews 4:15b
[20] See Hebrews 5:3
[21] Hughes, Hebrews, 173
[22] Hebrews 4:16

"Let Us Then, with Confidence, Draw Near."

In chapter four, verse sixteen, the author reaches an important conclusion based on what he already stated[23]. It is the second exhortation in this summary section.[24] The author, in effect, is saying that, considering who this great high priest is, namely, the eternal Son of God who is fully God and fully man, and reflecting on his great achievement of perfect obedience, the people of God now have confident access to God. In other words, having this high priest gives them confidence! One commentator writes, "Because "we" as God's people, have this kind of high priest, the pastor[25]urges us to "approach the throne of grace with confidence" to receive the help we need for victorious living."[26] The conclusion is that access to God is now open to everyone who approaches. They can come confidently because of the great high priest described earlier.

As is his custom, the author includes himself in the exhortation. "Let us" is a phrase used repeatedly throughout the letter to Hebrews. From chapter four and verse one through chapter thirteen and verse fifteen, our author uses this phrase fourteen times.[27] The inspired writer identifies himself closely with the people of God.

The act of "drawing near" to God is a phrase that may carry connotations referencing the old covenant Levitical system. Before Jesus Christ came into the world, the high priest was allowed to approach or draw near to God's presence only once a year on the Day of Atonement.[28] Others within the nation of Israel were excluded from this access. All has now

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[23] The author starts with the commonly used Greek particle οὖν often indicating something follows from another. It is often translated as "therefore." It can be noted that Paul Ellingworth, in his commentary on Hebrews, does not view οὖν in this passage as referring to what immediately precedes. Instead, he considers it a resumption of a subject that was interrupted.

[24] Chapter 4:14-16 summarizes what came before and leads into what will follow. Context details for this passage will be described later on in this essay. 4:14 was the first exhortation in our section.

[25] The "Pastor" is Gareth Cockerill's regular term for the inspired author of the Letter to the Hebrews.

[26] Cockerill, Hebrews, 227

[27]The following "Let us" passages can be referenced in this epistle: Hebrews 4:1,4:11,4:14,4:16, 6:1,10:22, 10:23,10:24,12:1 (used twice),12:28 (used twice),13:13, and 13:15.

[28] See Leviticus Chapter 16

changed in the new covenant! Sinners can confidently approach God because of this great high priest and His glorious work on their behalf. Philip Hughes provides a wonderful summary: "Sinners are no longer commanded to keep their distance in fear and trembling, but, on the contrary, are now invited to *draw near* and to do so *with confidence*. The passage of their great high priest through the heavens (v.14) has opened the way for them into the presence of God himself."[29]

"The Throne of Grace"

The author encourages God's people to approach "the throne of grace confidently." This is the throne of God Himself and the place where grace is poured out on His people. It is also the place where the great high priest sits at the right hand of God. Later in his letter, the author emphasizes this very point. "Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven" (Hebrews 8:1).[30]

Once again, we must look back to the old covenant types and shadows to fully appreciate the author's thought and the tremendous fulfillment of God's Word in the Lord Jesus Christ. The counterpart, or anti-type, of the throne of grace was the mercy seat in the tabernacle. The high priest visited the mercy seat only once a year. Now, everything is different! The author tells us that the mercy seat, the throne of grace, is always accessible. Regarding this mercy seat and its constant availability, F. F. Bruce writes, "It was before the mercy seat that the work of propitiation was completed in token on the day of atonement and the grace of God extended to His people; the presence of the Christian's high priest on the heavenly throne of grace bespeaks a

[29] Hughes, Hebrews, 173,174
[30] See also Hebrews 12:2 describing the Lord Jesus "seated at the right hand of God."

work of propitiation completed not in token but in fact, and the constant availability of divine aid in all their need."[31]

The great truth God has revealed is that the throne of grace is the true mercy seat, open and accessible at any time! Christ Jesus is the true propitiation for sin and guilt. Mercy and grace are found in Him. The author previously affirmed in his letter that the great high priest was "merciful." It is in His nature to be this way! "Therefore, he had to be made like his brothers in every respect so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people." (Hebrews 2:17) So the joyful news is that we receive mercy from our merciful high priest. Calvin takes up this wonderful thought. He writes, "This expression, 'that we may obtain mercy,' contains especially this most delightful truth: that all who, relying on the advocacy of Christ, pray to God, are certain to obtain mercy." 32 The author ends this section declaring that this grace and mercy is available to "help in time of need."[32] The phrase, taken in the context of this section, indicates that grace and mercy are available in times of trial and temptation. In times when a Christian is particularly weak and vulnerable to the evil one's attacks, God's grace is not only available but just in time! The Savior is "able to help those who are being tempted." (Hebrews 2:18). Peter O'Brien rightly calls it "timely assistance."[33]

Argument and Context

Hebrews 4:14-16 is a key transitional passage. The author uses these three verses to summarize prior revelation about the high priest's greatness. This is the one greater than the angels (chapters 1, 2), and the one greater than the prophet Moses (chapter 3). The author's

[31] F. F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 86,87
[32] εὔκαιρος - The inspired writer uses this adjective to mean seasonable, timely, or opportune.
[33] O'Brien, Hebrews, 186

summary contains two exhortations[34] for God's people. They must "hold fast" to their profession of faith and come to the "throne of grace," where they will find abundant and timely help. They can approach with confidence because of the vast superiority of this great high priest.

Along with the previously mentioned summary exhortations, the author begins a detailed discussion of the Lord Jesus Christ as a high priest for His people. Hebrews 4:14-16 acts as a springboard for much of what will follow. The theme of Christ's superiority as high priest continues through to chapter ten, verse eighteen. This important topic reaches its climax in chapter ten with the sacrificial offering for sins by the Lord Jesus Christ. "And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet" (Hebrews 10:11-13).

Peter O'Brien connects Hebrews 4:14-16 with two blocks of material from chapter 5:1 to 10:18. He writes, "The reference to Jesus as 'high priest' who has passed 'through the heavens' connects 4:14-16 thematically with two main movements in this large block of material: (1) the Son's appointment as high priest (5:1 – 7:28), and (2) his superior offering in heaven (8:3 – 10:18)."[35] O'Brien concurs that the function of 4:14-16 is an important turning point in the epistle and serves as a transition from what came before to what will follow. He calls this section an "overlapping transition."[36]

[34] The author begins his numerous exhortations starting in chapter 3 continuing to chapter 4:16. He had already exhorted the readers/listeners to "consider Jesus" (3:1), "take care" (3:12) not to have a hard heart, "exhort one another" (3:13), "let us fear" (4:1) so we don't fail to find God's rest. All these lead up to the summary exhortations in 4:14-16.
[35] O'Brien, Hebrews, 179
[36] Ibid

Gareth Cockerill summarizes Hebrews 4:14-16 as an introduction to the many blessings and benefits believers receive because of their great high priest. Mr. Cockerill explains this section, "The pastor introduces this section by urging his hearers to take advantage of these yet-to-be-described benefits. This initial exhortation raises the readers' expectations and whets their appetite for the pastor's fuller explanation to follow."[37] Cockerill appears to agree that our passage acts as a springboard for what comes next. In his words, the passage "whets" the listeners' "appetite."

Cockerill emphasizes the exhortations in Hebrews 4:14-16 and their alignment with Hebrews 10:19-25. He considers this a crucial element in understanding the Book of Hebrews' overall structure. In his introduction, he writes, "Here is a brief overview of the structure advocated below.[38] The parallel character of Hebrews 4:14-16 and 10:19-25 provides the initial impetus for dividing the main body of Hebrews into three large sections – 1:1 – 4:13; 4:14 – 10:18; 10:19 – 12:29."[39] One can quickly observe the parallel between 4:14-16 and 10:19 – 25.

"Therefore, brothers, since we have the confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." (Hebrews 10:19-25)

One can easily notice the similar exhortations in Hebrews chapter ten as in the passage we are studying. The author writes, "Let us draw near" and "Let us hold fast." Similar to chapter four, the exhortations for "us" are based on the character and work of the great priest. The final

[37] Cockerill, Hebrews, 221
[38] Cockerill declares our passage part of "the sermon's rhetorically effective structure."
[39] Ibid, 61

outcome in chapter ten, like in chapter four, is that God's people have confident access to God. They are confident to "draw near" in "full assurance of faith."

Like Philip O'Brien, Cockerill views Hebrews 4:14–16 as an introduction to what will follow leading up to 10:18. He believes that the author of the epistle is laying the groundwork by showing the superiority of the high priest. He entitles 4:14 through 10:18, "The Son's High Priesthood – Resource and Urgency for Perseverance."[40]

F.F. Bruce, in his excellent commentary on the epistle to the Hebrews, links 4:14 through 6:20. His exposition of this section is entitled "The High Priesthood of Christ."[41] This is not to suggest, however, that he does not see parallel themes leading up to 10:18. He distinguishes or further subdivides 7:1 through 10:18. He isolates chapter 7:1-28 on the priesthood of Melchizedek and chapter 8:1 - 10:18 on the old covenant sacrifices. In both sections, the priesthood and the role of the priest, leading up to the great high priest Jesus Christ, are central to the commentator's thoughts.

In his exposition of the book of Hebrews, Philip Hughes also views Hebrews 4:14 as a critical transitional passage in which the apostolic writer launches an in-depth commentary on the excellency of the high priest, the Lord Jesus Christ. Hughes entitles Hebrews 4:14 – 10:18, "Christ superior to Aaron." In the commentator's analysis, 4:14 starts the third of the superiority sections.[42]

In Paul Ellingworth's commentary on the epistle to the Hebrews, transition is central to his discussion of Hebrews 4:14-16. Commenting on these verses, the author introduces this passage by saying, "These verses begin a gradual transition to the central theme of Christ's

[40] Cockerill, Hebrews, 218
[41] Bruce, Hebrews, 84
[42] The first being 1:4 – 2:18 describing Christ as superior to angels. The second 3:1 -4:13 describing Christ as superior to Moses.

priesthood and sacrifice, foreshadowed in 2:17;3:1 and explored in ever greater detail to 10:18, 10:19-31 forming a paraenetic counterpart to the present section."[43] Like other exegetes, the author considers Hebrews 4:14-16 a pivotal passage in understanding the letter.

Summary

We have examined the importance and central role of Hebrews 4:14-16 in detail. We see that this key section connects the inspired author's thoughts between earlier revelation and later revelation. The main focus on the superiority of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Christian's great high priest is the central theme leading up to Hebrews 10:18. The next important section, similar in many ways to 4:14-16, is Hebrews 10:19-25. Here, the writer to Hebrews concludes what came before with encouragements to the believer to act on the great truths he has just shared. In other words, since Christ is our great high priest and we can confidently approach God, the Christian must now respond. Like 4:14-16, Hebrews 10:19-25 also serves as a starting point for the author's final call to persevere in faith.

[43] Paul Ellingworth, The Epistle to the Hebrews (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 265